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SUBJECT: TURKISH TV AIRS FILM DEPICTING ARMENIAN "GENOCIDE"

¶1. A Turkish cable TV channel on April 13 broadcast, for the first time in Turkey, the 2002 movie "Ararat," a film by Canadian-Armenian director Atom Egoyan that promotes the idea that the massacre of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 constituted genocide. The ultra-nationalist station Kanal Turk decided to air the movie four years after protests by Turkish nationalists prevented "Ararat" from being screened in Turkish movie theaters. Kanal Turk reportedly prepared the ground by polling its viewers on whether they wanted to see the film; 85 percent said yes.

¶2. The broadcast, which opened with a commentary calling the movie a product of imperialist propaganda partially funded from the U.S., ended with a discussion between a retired Turkish general and a film critic. Kanal Turk had advertised that the post-film discussion would include participants who dispute the official view of the Turkish state regarding the events of 1915. In the end, none of the invited critics of the official view appeared. Hrant Dink, publisher of an Armenian-language newspaper in Istanbul, reportedly showed up at the studio but backed out at the last minute. Professors Baskin Oran and Halil Berkday had informed the station that they could not attend due to previous engagements. Dink is currently appealing his 2005 criminal conviction for comments he wrote regarding Turkish-Armenian relations. Oran is on trial for a report he wrote on minorities in Turkey. Berkday has written that the events of 1915 contain many elements of genocide.

¶3. Despite the controversial nature of the film, there has been no discernible reaction against the broadcast. Columnist Mehmet Ali Birand, writing in the Turkish Daily News, cited the lack of controversy as proof that Turkey had successfully broken a taboo. "Kanal Turk did the right thing," Birand wrote. "It proved that this film can be shown in a Turkey that has self-confidence and which does not believe the Armenian allegations of genocide. It showed that the airing of a propaganda film is received as a normal thing in the society, no matter how disturbing it is."

Comment: Broader Space for Discussion

¶4. This broadcast follows the September 2005 Istanbul

conference on the events of 1915, at which a number of scholars and writers contradicted the official view. The conference, like "Ararat", was initially blocked by nationalist opposition, then proceeded. While this topic remains highly sensitive, the film's airing indicates a greater willingness in Turkey to air alternative points of view and deconstruct taboos.

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